The Amish and Their School Problem

By VINCENT R. TORTORA

In the past two years the 10,000 or so Amish farmers in southeastern Pennsylvania have received much more publicity than is their wont or desire. These austere people who diffidently detach themselves from almost all aspects of the modern world to live intensely religious lives on their beautiful, exceedingly simple farms unequivocally deplore the public attention that is being focused on them.

One source of the publicity has been the production in New York of a highly successful musical entitled "Plain and Fancy" which is loosely based on Amish life and manners. Another source, and the one with which this article is concerned, has been the continued and well-publicized prosecution and imprisonment of a number of Amish fathers for withdrawing their children from school at 14 years of age so they may work on the family farms. They contend that religious principles do not permit an Amish child to study after his fourteenth year.

But the Pennsylvania state law stipulates that farm children must attend school until their fifteenth year before being eligible for a permit to work on the family farm. Only under "dire financial stress" may a child leave school at fourteen. In either case ,the Superintendents of Public Instruction grants the permit.

After many years of unsuccessfully attempting to convince the Amish fathers that the withdrawal of their children from school one year early was illegal, several school boards in townships in Lancaster County began to prosecute. They were fearful of losing their state education subsidies if the illegal truancies continued. Starting in 1953, an almost unbroken chain of Amish fathers reluctantly appeared at hearings, passively refused to pay imposed fines and resignedly shuffled off to jail. Non-Amish friends and neighbors became so distressed at the spectacle of highly principled Amish sullenly sitting out their jail sentences with an air of Gandhian martyrdom that they volunteered payment of their fines. The Amish fathers left jail just as resignedly as they had entered. To the Amish mind, paying fines, retaining lawyers or making any other gesture of defense is tantamount to admitting guilt. One man has been prosecuted ten times.

Finally, several neighbors who do business with the Amish grew tired of the unabating prosecutions and decided to retain two Lancaster attorneys on behalf of their friends. Although some of the Amish themselves protested against "going to law," Lawyers W. Hensel Brown and Charles W. Eaby petitioned the Lancaster County Court for an injunction against one of the township school boards to stay prosecutions during the 1953-54 school year. It was hoped that during the following school year injunctions would be granted against all the prosecuting townships. The purpose of the injunction was to give State Senator Edward Kessler of southern Lancaster County the opportunity to introduce a bill in the State Legislature which would give the Superintendent of Public Instruction the authority to grant farm work permits on religious grounds to 14-year olds. The bill passed the Legislature despite the vote of urban legislators who opposed what they considered to be a bill that would permit child labor. For a reason that has gone unexplained to this day, ex-Governor Fine vetoed the Kessler Bill during the 1953-54 session.

At the beginning of the 1954-55 school year, prosecutions started again with usual regularity as a number of Amish parents of 14-year-olds held them away from school. The lawyers forthwith petitioned the court for injunctions against all the concerned townships; but no more were granted.

In a definitive attempt to terminate the whole distasteful situation and bring the full issue to public attention, Lawyers Brown and Eaby prepared a test case appeal which will be presented to the Pennsylvania State Supreme Court in September or October. They took the case of Amish farmer Smoker who had been convicted and fined during the 1953-54 school year for not sending his child to school and contended that his conviction had been unjust because: 1. the religious freedom of the Amish farmer is violated by continued prosecutions and convictions; and, 2. the Superintendant of Public Instruction exceeds his authority when he refuses to grant permits for Amish children to leave school at fourteen insofar as requests for same are based on religious grounds.

In order to understand better the points made in the appeal, it might be well to examine the position of the Amish.

Ever since the exceptionally strict Amish religious sects immigrated to this country in the late 1600's, they have striven to live their lives, practice their religion and do their farming exactly as their fathers did. This is all part of their way of life. As the surrounding world progressed by leaps and bounds, it became increasingly difficult for them to keep their faith. Yet they managed to adjust themselves to the multitude of pressures from the outside with a minimum of compromise. This they have done largely by shutting themselves, and especially their children, off from "worldly" or secularizing influences.

But the parents are not able to keep their children under their constant protective care; they must go to school. The parents, therefore, in an attempt to shelter their children from what is "world," prescribe to the township school officials the type of school their children should attend; it must have only one room, have no inside plumbing or electricity, be heated only by a wood or coal stove, etc. The township officials bend over backwards, as it were, to comply. Every elementary school the Amish attend embodies all these requisites.

But most of the school systems in the Amish district of Lancaster County hew to the traditional 12-year education program — eight years of elementary and four years of high. A child therefore spends eight years in a one-room elementary school and then must go to a consolidated high school, which is usually quite modern. If an Amish child begins to go to school at six, he is only 14 when transferred to a high school with internal plumbing, electric lights, central heating, etc. Since the state law provides that he must be 15 before he can leave school to work on a farm, the whole issue revolves around the single year between the ages of 14 and 15. How is the child to keep away from the "worldly" influence of the high school for the one year?

No Amish child stays in school after his fifteenth year, regardless of his academic promise. A very small number of Amish parents compromise their religious views and permit their children to enter the modern schools. A few others take advantage of the alternatives afforded them by school authorities. These are: 1. Letting the child continue into the "second eighth grade" set up in the one-room school houses by several of the townships. Actually, in this appendage, as it were, of the eighth grade, the child learns little more than slightly advanced arithmetic, spelling and geography; 2. Instructing the child in townships where there is no "second eighth grade," to get himself "left back" in the eighth grade, and 3. Sending the child to school at seven (compulsory education in Pennsylvania begins at eight) so he will be 15 by the time he finishes the eighth grade.

Essentially, the Amish distrust higher education. They believe that a man who is too well educated turns to the world and does not follow Christ. The belief of the Old Order Amish as to higher education is founded on the Dortrecht Creed set forth on Page 395 of the Martyr's Mirror which reads as follows:

"And since it is a known fact that a lack of faithful ministers, and the erring of the sheep because of the lack of good doctrine, arise principally from the unworthiness of the people; therefore, the people of God, needing this, should not turn to such as have been educated in universities, according to the wisdom of men, that they may talk and dispute, and seek to sell their purchase gift of temporal gain and who according to the custom of the world do not truly follow Christ in the humility of regeneration. But, the true members of Christ must, according to the Counsel of God, with humble fasting and praying turn to the Father of the harvest, who is the true Sender, that by His divine wisdom he will raise up men, whom he may set as faithful and wise stewards over His household, that they may give them meat in due season and may enkindle them in their hearts with His Spirit and urge them into His harvest, that they may feed the flock of Christ, not for the milk and wool, but of ready mind, with knowledge and understanding and lead them on the right of way to the Kingdom of God; and thus execute the ministry imposed upon them by God, by the strength which God gives."

They further believe that, since the child's entire life will be devoted to farming, he will have no use for any academic knowledge he might acquire after the eighth grade. But he would have a good measure of use for the knowledge of farming. This he could acquire at home, apprenticed to his father.

Finally, for reasons of their isolation from the "worldly," the Amish only reluctantly hire non-Amish farm hands to work on their farms. Whenever it is possible they help one another. It is quite understandable, then, that they would want their children to reach the point just as quickly as possible where they can devote full time to farm work.

Critics of the position taken by the Amish contend that "economic factors" lie behind it. As evidence, they cite the anxiety of the Amish parent to put his child to full-time work on the farm. They oppose granting concessions to the Amish for "economic reasons" and withholding them from other groups.

Those who so blatantly decry the Amish would appear to have lost their sense of balance and of perspective. Certainly a strict religious sect like the Amish that has chosen the humble and secluded life and lived it unwaveringly for 250 years would not be apt to expose itself to the continued degrading affronts of the past two years because of patently materialistic "economic reasons" . . . Rather, their motives cannot be other than those stemming from a profound religious conviction.

In the final analysis, the appeal before the Supreme Court of Pennsylvania has little chance of causing a reversal of the conviction of the concerned Amish father. Nor will it end the impasse. It will only serve to call attention to the plight of these good people.

Daniel H. Shertzer, a Lancaster attorney who has been most interested in the problem and is well aware of the seeming irreconcilability of the issues, suggests what seems to be a logical solution (though the legality has not been tested, it would appear to be legal). It would involve the setting up by the Amish of their own parochial-vocational schools. In this way they would come under the State vocational - training program and be permitted to spend two weeks working on the farm—which vocation they would be studying — and two weeks learning the academic subjects prescribed by the State. This could continue until their fifteenth year when they would leave school.

Whatever the outcome, it is to be hoped that the Amish farmer who has achieved great dignity as a profound religious man and as an ideal citizen does not lose something in the public estimation as a result of his intransigent principle.

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BULLY LYON AGAIN

Our request for additional Pennsylvania German rimes that had grown up about that colorful Berks Countian, Bully Lyon (William Young Lyon, 1832-1909) who served in his day as constable, Sheriff's deputy, Chief of Police, coroner, a detective, etc., etc., brought the following verses from the aged Mrs. Jennie L. Creveling, Allentown, who adds that she used to sing it in her girlhood days:

Do waar ich mol in Reading,
Do waar ich net bekannt;
Noh kummt der Bully Lyon
Un reisst mich an der Hand.
Noh saag ich, "Bully Lyon,
Was hawwich dann geduh?"—
Noh saagt der Bully Lyon,
"Du waarscht en wieschder Bu!"—
Noh fiehrt er mich ins courthouse nei
Un saagt datt misst ich bleiwe;
Noh zieh ich mei Babier raus,
Noh waar ich widder frei.

We had hoped to receive verses which would reveal this little ballad in its entirety, if such ever existed. In **Songs Along the Mahantongo** (Boyer - Buffington - Yoder, The Pennsylvania Dutch Folklore Center, Lancaster, 1951) we find the following:

Bald gehn ich noch dem Redden zu;
Datt waar ich nicht bekannt.
Datt kummt der Pauli Lyons
Un nemmt mich bei der Hand.
Er fiehrt mich noch der Prissen zu,
Un saagt er: "Do musscht nei;
Doo musscht du drei Yaahr bleiwe,
Noo wascht du widder frei."
(Noo saag ich zum Pauli Lyons:
"Was hawwich dann geduh?"
Noo saagt der Pauli Lyons:
"Ei, du waarscht en schlechder bu)."
Noo kummt doch meine Fraa,
Die kummt yoo gaar so weit;
Noo saagt der Pauli Lyons:
"Die iss nicht recht gescheit."

The third stanza was inserted in modified form from Stoudt's version. Neither Stoudt nor the editors of **Songs Along the Mahantongo** seemed to know that the name is "Lyon" and not "Lyons" (see ECK, July 2, 1955).

The version of John Baer Stoudt in **The Folklore of the Pennsylvania Germans** (Philadelphia, 1916) remains the best. It runs as follows:

Do kumm ich mol noch Reading,
Do waar ich net bekannt;
Do kummt der Bully Lyons,
Un nemmt mich bei der Hand.
Noh saag ich zum Bully Lyons:
"Was hawwich dann geduh."—
Noh saagt der Bully Lyons:
"Ei, du waarscht en schlechter Bu."
Noh fiehrt er mich ins courthouse.
Un saagt: "Do musscht du nei,
Do musscht du drei Yaahr bleiwe.
Noh bischt du widder frei."
Noh kummt mei Fraa mich sehne,
Sie hot so arrig weit;
Noh saagt der Bully Lyons,
Sie waer gewiss net gscheit.

DER GUCK VERFIEHRT

Es iss en ait Schprichwatt, ass saagt, "Die Sache sin net immer, was mer meent sie waere."

Paar Yaahr zerick hawwich gschwetzt mit me Mann vun Harrisbarrig. Er hot mir en Schtori verzeehlt, ass so gschpassich waar, ich muss heit noch lache, wann ich draa denk. Des iss die Schtori.

En Mann iss uffem Paefment gelofe imme Deel vun der Schtadt, wu nix waar ass Wohnheiser, gaar ken Bissnissbletz waare datt. Der Mann hot en kleener schwazer satchel gedraagge.

Uff eemoll geht en Dier uff amme Haus iwwer der Schtrooss. En Mann iss raus kumme, arrig verkollebiert. Er hot den Mann mit em statchel gsehne un hot gsaat, "Kumm graad do rei! Ich brauch dich. Un es iss ken Zeit zu verliere."

Der Mann mit em satchel waar erschtaunt. Ferwas weit ebber ihn nau graad hawwe? Er hot awwer nix gsaat un iss zu der Dier nei.

Wie er im Gang waar, hot er der Mann sehne die Schteeg nuff schpringe. Er iss ihm nooch so schtarrig ass er hot kenne. Uffem zwedde Schtock iss der Mann vum Haus zu re Schlofschtubb nei gerennt. Es hot der Mann mit em satchel aardlich gedingt, awwer er iss aa dezu nei.

In der Schtubb waar en Fraa im Bett. Sie waar aageduh, wie mer ewwe iss, wann mer im Bett iss, net zu schwer. Sie waar gans feierrot im Gsicht.

Der Mann vum Haus hot gsaat zum Mann mit em satchel, "Guck sie yuscht moll aa. Was deetscht du, wann dei Fraa so aussehne deet?"

Der Mann mit em satchel hot gsaat, "Ich deet graad schicke fer en Dokter" — "Liewer Yammer," saagt der Mann vum Haus, "bischt du ken Dokter?" — "Gewiss net," saagt der Mann mit em satchel.— "Was bischt du dann?" frogt der Mann vum Haus. Noh hot der Mann mit em satchel gsaat, "Ich bin en piano-tuner."

Ya, die Sache sin net immer was mer meent sie waere. Nee, net beim Tschockvoll!

—Der Kaschbar Hufnagel
Vun der Lebanon News